

Reducing Work Related Stress

A Short Guide for Staff



What is work - related stress?

Stress is the mind and body's reaction to change. It isn't a disease. Stress can be caused by events at work or by events outside of work, or both. If stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health. For example:

- physical effects such as heart disease, back pain, gastrointestinal disturbances and various minor illnesses;
- psychological effects such as anxiety and depression.

This guide is concerned with work-related stress: that is, stress that arises from, or is made worse by, work. Work related stress is not an illness, but it can lead to increased problems with ill health, if it is prolonged or particularly intense.

You are not alone if you feel very or extremely stressed. In the country as a whole, as many as one in five people could be feeling the same way. Ideally tackling work-related stress is a partnership between you, your manager, and the University: a partnership based on honesty and trust, where you all say what you feel.

Stress is not a weakness and is not something you have to suffer. The University has a responsibility to protect your health and safety at work and as a good employer will appreciate any suggestions you have for reducing work-related stress.

Symptoms of Stress

The symptoms of stress can manifest themselves in a variety of ways over time and, of course, in combination with each other. There are three broad areas of symptoms:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Behaviour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> You can often increase your consumption of stimulants, such as alcohol or cigarettes.<input type="checkbox"/> Your eating habits frequently change.<input type="checkbox"/> You can become less reliable with poor timekeeping and increased absence from work and even more accident-prone.<input type="checkbox"/> Personal relationships often become strained, often for no apparent reason. |
| Mental health symptoms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> You will often be increasingly irritable and withdrawn<input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety and depression are fellow travellers with stress<input type="checkbox"/> You will usually find it harder to maintain your concentration and become increasingly forgetful<input type="checkbox"/> Sleep often becomes more difficult |
| Physical symptoms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> General aches and pains sounds almost petty, but people living with stress often find aches lasting longer and developing into generally tense muscles and a general lethargy.<input type="checkbox"/> Headaches and migraines become more frequent<input type="checkbox"/> You can become more susceptible to colds and flu |

There are other symptoms and there can be longer-term issues which develop into more complicated symptoms. Equally, any one of these points could be nothing in itself but if you recognise a number of features of your life outlined above, then now may be a good time to identify the cause.

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Personal Checklist - How well do you manage your stress?

Answer the questions below to help you to understand how well you currently manage your stress.

- Do you know the main causes of your stress?
- Can you recognise your early signs of stress?
- Do you take some exercise each day?
- Have you a leisure activity you enjoy?
- Can you use simple relaxation exercises?
- Do you feel good about yourself and your achievements?
- Can you be assertive?
- Can you plan your time?
- Do you enjoy your work?
- Do you limit your fat intake and eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day?
- Do you get enough sleep?
- Can you balance your work and leisure?

No one can ever be in control of all the stresses in their life, but we can learn how to manage them better. The University through the Higher Health program (Health and Well Being program) and the Staff Training and Development program offers individual staff members the opportunity to build their confidence and skills in areas such as healthy life style, communication skills, managing change, conflict resolution. These programs can also address individual issues or interests such as insomnia, diet, yoga, aerobics and healthy heart assessments. Further information can be found at the following websites:

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/studentlife/healthservices/>

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/training/>

What can you do at work?

You can help at work by:

- 'doing your bit' for managing work-related stress by talking to your managers: if they don't know there's a problem, they can't help. If you don't feel able to talk directly to your manager, ask an employee representative to raise the issue on your behalf;
- supporting your colleagues if they are experiencing work-related stress. Encourage them to talk to their manager or staff representative;
- trying to channel your energy into solving the problem rather than just worrying about it. Think about what would make you happier at work and discuss this with your manager.

What can you expect of your supervisor or manager ?

- Treat stressed staff in the same way as those with a physical health problem
- Discuss the issue with you and demonstrate that they are concerned about your health
- Ask if there is anything they can do to help
- Advise you about sources of help within or outside the University
- Actively follow up stress problems and continue to demonstrate their wish to support you
- Review and if necessary modify your work tasks and responsibilities. Consider any simple modifications to work
- Develop a return to work plan if you have had sickness absence due to stress or depression
- Monitor your rehabilitation and return to work progress

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What to do after a stress - related illness

If you have been off work with a stress-related illness, talk about it with your manager or your senior personnel consultant when you return. Say how you feel, explain what led to the event and what you would like to see happen. Take a work colleague with you if you do not feel you can do this on your own.

What can you do out of work?

There are usually more areas than we initially think where we can take control of our own lives. A key component of any approach involves making a change, doing something different. The following advice will not prevent work-related stress, but may help you take care of yourself and ensure that you don't make the problem worse. You can:

Changing your thinking	Some of the most productive and rewarding techniques involve adjusting the way we think about our situations. Small shifts can quickly free up creative energy and increase our options. When we are feeling low, it is sometimes hard to 'think outside of the box'.
Develop a positive attitude	The development of a positive attitude to life is an important skill in managing stress. Feeling confident and good about yourself will help you deal with difficult situations and develop the skills to make relationships work.
Seek support	Talk to family or friends about what you're feeling – they may be able to help you and provide the support you need to raise your concerns at work.
Keep fit	<p>Be physically active – it stimulates you and gives you more energy. Physically fit and healthy people are able to handle stress better than those who are not. A healthy lifestyle includes regular exercise, a sensible diet, getting adequate sleep and finding time for leisure and relaxation.</p> <p>A key component of any approach involves making a change, doing something different. This often involves doing something physical, not necessarily taking up jogging or going down the local gym. Even just a quick 20-minute walk can help and that is something you can start on today.</p> <p>In the slightly longer term, you should look at your diet. Changing to a healthy diet is a good thing in itself but there are also advantages in learning to take the time to prepare and cook fresh food. This can be a relaxing activity in itself.</p>
Watch your diet	<p>Stop smoking – it doesn't help you to stay healthy, even though you might think it relaxes you.</p> <p>Try to keep alcohol consumption within limits – alcohol acts as depressant and will not help you tackle the problem.</p> <p>Watch your caffeine intake – tea, coffee and some soft drinks (e.g. cola drinks) may contribute to making you feel more anxious.</p> <p>Try learning relaxation techniques – some people find it helps them cope with pressures in the short term</p>
Relaxation	<p>Do something that forces you to think about something other than work, something that needs your active involvement. Why not blast some aliens in a computer game rather than just having the TV on in the background?</p> <p>Recovering from the 'high alert' positions that our bodies may have been in for long periods during the day is important and sometimes hard to do. Many of us need to learn new relaxation techniques. There is a great variety of approaches: courses, books, tapes, exercises etc available. Pick one that works for you.</p>
Rest	Sleep is also very important and, again, there are a number of guides available to getting a good rest. A common tip is not to go to bed until you are ready, rather than at a specific time, so that you avoid too much lying awake at night. Try to avoid pharmaceutical solutions while you are over-stressed.
Your doctor	If you have any concerns about the degree to which you feel stressed, do visit your doctor. He or she can be an important part of your planning.

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Where can I get more help?

- ❑ If work is affected, discuss the problem with Personnel Services Consultant who may refer you to suitable counselling

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hrs/contacts/index.php#area>

- ❑ You can directly access counsellors through Health Services (Student Life) on each campus

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/studentlife/counselling/staff.htm>

The Counselling Service offers the following services for University staff: -

- ❑ **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** - this program provides professional, confidential, voluntary and free counselling to employees with difficulties which meet certain criteria and which affect work performance. Individual counselling will be short-term (up to 5 sessions); when requested, counsellors may conduct mediation between a staff member and his/her supervisor; when a group of staff are facing similar difficulties managing a situation, counsellors may conduct a group session. Staff can contact the EAP independently by making an appointment to see a counsellor on their campus or supervisors can suggest that a staff member use the program.
- ❑ **Counselling support for personal difficulties** - individual staff needing counselling support for personal difficulties (for example: marriage or relationship issues, family or parenting issues) may be offered counselling on a fee-for-service basis. A sliding scale of charges applies based on the income level of the staff member.
- ❑ **Group programs** - staff training workshops have been designed upon request to meet the collective needs of groups and faculties. Such programs include Critical Incident Debriefing, Stress Management, Managing Change, and Coping with Difficult Behaviour.

Where can I get more information?

Other information can be obtained from Human Resources or Health Services including a copy of the Deakin University Work and Family Guide: balancing family and work (information and resources)

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hrs/ps/family.php>